

Congress of the United States
Washington, DC 20515

March 4, 2013

The Honorable Frank Lucas
Chairman
House Committee on Agriculture
1301 Longworth House Office Building
Washington, DC 20515

The Honorable Collin Peterson
Ranking Member
House Committee on Agriculture
1305 Longworth House Office Building
Washington, DC 20515

Dear Chairman Lucas and Ranking Member Peterson:

As you work to develop a new multi-year Farm Bill, we write to support the Title II Regional Conservation Partnership Program (RCPP) proposed last year and urge you to include the modified language from the Senate's Agriculture Reform, Food, and Jobs Act of 2012 in a comprehensive Farm Bill this Congress.

The Great Lakes are healthier today because of the USDA's voluntary, incentives-based conservation programs. A 2011 study by the USDA's Natural Resources Conservation Service found that conservation tillage and other conservation practices have resulted in a 50 percent decline in sediment entering rivers and streams that flow into the Great Lakes. It also found 36 and 37 percent declines, respectively, in phosphorus and nitrogen loading.

While agriculture contributes to the problems facing the Great Lakes, farmers are contributing to solutions by undertaking conservation practices on their land that keep nutrients out of Great Lakes rivers and streams. The new Regional Conservation Partnership Program provides another tool for farmers and our region to use to address these issues.

As you know, the bi-partisan RCPP provides targeted conservation funding for natural resource issues, leverages private resources and gives particular attention to areas of critical need. It was created by consolidating the Agricultural Water Enhancement Program (AWEP), Cooperative Conservation Partnership Initiative (CCPI), the Chesapeake Bay Program, and the Great Lakes Basin Program for Soil, Erosion and Sediment control. While it streamlines program management, this efficiency should not come at a cost to on-the-ground conservation in areas with particularly difficult resource concerns.

By adopting the Senate version of the program, we can avoid this result. In addition to the national and state funding provided by the RCPP, the Senate version sets aside a greater proportion than the House version of RCPP funds to a third category – Critical Conservation Areas. The Senate version also allows the Secretary to designate up to 6 Critical Conservation Areas while the House version allows for up to 8. In short, the Senate version provides a higher level of funding to fewer targeted conservation areas.

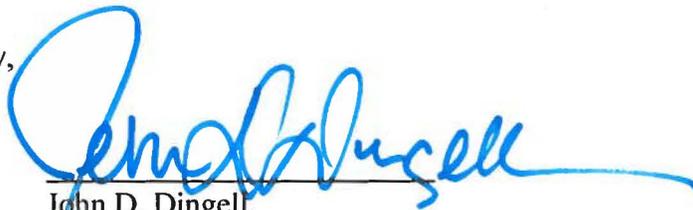
Urban and agricultural runoff continues to contribute to the problems facing the Great Lakes. Experts say new algae blooms are being fueled by excessive amounts of phosphorus washing into the lakes from farms, urban areas, and municipal sewage treatment facilities. Stronger storms driven by climate change and invasive mussels also contribute to the problem. These are a potent mix of problems that can be addressed by the innovative partnerships encouraged by the RCPP.

We again encourage you to include the RCPP as you develop a Farm Bill proposal for this year.

Sincerely,



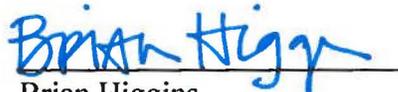
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